

Mt. Olive Chronicle

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Chief: School cops must fight gangs

By PHIL GARBER Managing Editor Please see related editorial — Page 4

Added Needs

MOUNT OLIVE TWP. – Uniformed police are needed in the middle and high schools to deal with a growing gang presence in the community, drug abuse and violence, Chief Edward Katona said on Monday.

But some officials are reluctant to accept a federal grant to fund the two police, referred to as School Resource Officers, because the township would have to pick up the tab when the grants run out in three years.

The township is one of 15 law enforcement agencies across the nation which have been offered grants through the COPS in School program, under the U.S. Department of Justice.

Mount Olive is slated to receive \$250,000 which would be used to partially pay the salaries of two new officers. In the first year, the township would pay \$24,600 per officer; \$34,500 in the second year; and \$53,100 in the final year.

The township would have to pay the full salaries of both officers, estimated to be about \$100,000 including benefits per officer, when the grant expires in three years.

The N.J. State Police have pointed to increased gang activity around the state, mostly concentrated in the urban areas. But Katona said police have seen evidence of gang activity in the township, including telltale “tagging” or graffiti typically associated with gangs.

The chief said it was unclear if the tagging was associated with such larger, statewide gangs known as the Bloods or Crips or whether they were related to , homegrown gangs.

In addition, Katona said the well-established Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program has focused more on the elementary schools and police need to devote more time to anti-drug efforts in the middle school and high school.

The general issue of violence, including bullying, is a growing factor along with the need to provide greater school security as mandated by the state Attorney General in the years after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado, Katona said.

“These are issues that will have to be addressed in the future so we should use the federal dollars offered to us now,” said Katona. “Now is the time to act and avail ourselves of this money.”

Under the plan, two uniformed officers would be assigned full-time to the high school and middle school.

Under the terms of the grant, Katona said the police would be assigned to the schools for four years before they could be reassigned.

The chief said current officers on the 51-member force are needed for dealing with increasing traffic issues along with other law enforcements efforts in a changing population.

Under the former administration of Mayor Paul Licitra, the township rejected a plan to accept federal funds to hire police for the schools after the school board declined to partially fund the salaries.

Katona said members of the Board of Education and Schools Superintendent Rosalie Lamonte now support the plan to assign police to the schools.

Township Council President Robert Greenbaum said he was concerned with the impact on the budget when the township has to pay

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the full salaries in three years.

He also said he was not convinced of the need for full-time officers assigned to the schools.

"It's an interesting concept if police are needed in the schools but I'm not convinced they are," Greenbaum said.

He said the current force may be adequate to provide security at the schools. Existing officers also might be assigned part-time to the schools, according to Greenbaum.

"The COPS grant is bait to put more police on the force and they would be stuck at the schools," Greenbaum said. "I don't think there is a per se safety problem in our schools."

He said police would function more as counselors in the schools and that the schools already have counselors.

The grant was announced on Thursday, July 27, in a statement by Democratic U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine, who also is the Democratic candidate for governor. In the statement, Mayor Richard DeLaRoche said he supported the grant.

"Senator Corzine's success in helping Mount Olive get funding for our school resource officers will make our township a safer community," DeLaRoche said. "There is nothing more important than protecting our children and police in our schools will go a long way in achieving that goal. In these tough fiscal times, funding for police in our schools is one of the best investments we as a community and nation can make."

A July 28 memo from Business Administrator Robert Casey, however, alerted Township Council members to the budgetary implications of the grant.

"The use of these COPS grants effectively prevents you from any budget control within the police department," Casey wrote. "With this new grant, you will be prevented from exercising any budget reductions in the police salary account for uniform officers for the next three years."

Casey said police departments generally, "have been very clever in establishing a wall between themselves and budget control by elected personnel."

"Obviously, they continue to be successful in Mount Olive in using this technique," Casey wrote.

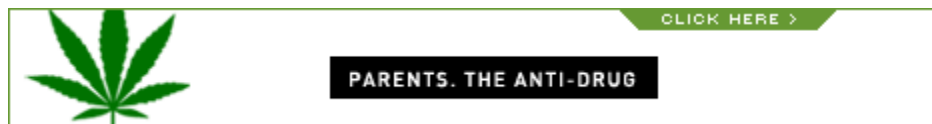
Casey said accepting the grant would tie the council's hands over future cuts in police salaries.

"You make talk about reductions in personnel but in reality you have few if any really significant options available to you if you continue in this grant acceptance mode," Casey wrote.

At the Aug. 9 council meeting, Township Councilman Steve Rattner said he was concerned with funding.

"The grant starts off well, but this starts affecting our budget very quickly. Where are we going to find the funds?" Rattner said.

DeLaRoche and Councilwoman Colleen Labow both supported accepting the grant.



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